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ABSTRACT

Vision is a critical piece of the educational reform puzzle that anchors and gives meaning to the whole. America's current vision for education promotes universal education access, factory-model organization approach, learning as a passive activity, raw ability as a performance determinant, and a basic skills emphasis for average students. Except for commitment to universal access, this vision is outdated and reflects neither present-day demands nor current learning research. A new vision might stress the importance of universal access (reinforced by equity and excellence) and seek to reorganize schools and classrooms around student needs, encourage active student participation in their learning, provide enough time and opportunity for all students to master a challenging curriculum, and help all students use their minds well and become lifelong learners. A vision should focus on desired outcomes, be inspirational, and reflect the values and beliefs that bind a community together. Standards translate a broad vision into statements of desired performance outcomes that encourage all students to learn at higher levels and provide benchmarks for assessing student performance and reform effectiveness. High standards keyed to world-class performance levels are necessary to protect the nation's economic health and competitiveness. Standards must allow flexibility, consider local needs, and encourage creativity. Advice and examples are provided for establishing and adopting standards. (MLH)

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# CREATING VISIONS AND STANDARDS TO SUPPORT THEM

## Restructuring the Education System

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## DEAR FRIENDS:

This brochure focuses on two essential components of a comprehensive strategy to improve education in this country — vision and standards. A vision of what we want students to know and be able to do and of what kind of education system will support those goals is critical to motivating change. Performance expectations or standards help define the desired results of that change, with respect to schools and education systems, as well as individual students.

This brochure is not a "how-to" booklet because the ideas it discusses do not lend themselves to recipes. There is no single best approach that works for every state or school district. Instead, we have tried to present some suggestions and perspectives to help you think about how to use the vision- and standard-setting process to move reform forward in your state, district and/or school.

As important as vision and standards are, they are only two pieces of the restructuring puzzle. By clarifying our expectations, vision and standards define the boundaries of the puzzle. Ultimately, however, the reform policies and strategies districts and states set within these boundaries will determine whether we deliver on the promises of this reform for all students.

I encourage you to see other publications in this series for information on other critical aspects of a comprehensive education reform plan.

Sincerely,

John R. McKernan, Jr.
Governor of Maine
1991-92 ECS Chairman

# VISION

## If you don't know where you are going, any route will do . . .

Policy makers often express impatience when education reform discussions focus on vision. Developing a vision often seems fuzzy and passive; most policy makers simply have little experience in or patience for designing a "vision."

Yet experience shows that the most effective organizations are those with a clear, purposeful vision. Some of America's most successful companies — Johnson & Johnson, Hewlett Packard, Procter & Gamble — have built their organizations around statements of belief that define their basic goals and guide decision making.

Vision gives reform direction. Too often, reforms are implemented in a fragmented, uncoordinated manner. Significant change in our education system can occur only if we have a clear sense of where we are going — of what we want students to know and be able to do and of what kind of education system will support the kind of learning we want from students. However, vision is not in itself enough to ensure success. Without action, even the best-defined vision has no impact. Vision must be backed up by specific strategies for reform. Although vision is just one piece of the reform puzzle, it is a critical piece that anchors and gives meaning to the whole.

## If we cannot imagine it, it never will happen . . .

Vision drives practice. Our current education system reflects a vision for education in America. Although that vision may not be formally spelled out, its values permeate every aspect of schooling. Present practice is built on a vision that reflects the following beliefs:

- *Universal access* to educational opportunities is fundamentally important.
- The *factory model* is an efficient and useful model for organizing schools.
- Learning is *passive* — teachers deliver knowledge; students receive it.
- *Raw ability, not effort,* determines performance.
- The average student needs only *basic skills.*

Except for the commitment to universal access, this vision is outdated and does not reflect demands of today's world or what we know about how students learn. Before policy makers and educators can hope to transform the nation's schools, they need to take these factors into consideration and articulate a new vision. This new vision might incorporate the following beliefs:

- Universal access is fundamentally important, as is achieving both *equity and excellence.*
- Schools and classrooms are organized around *student needs.*



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- Students learn best by being *active participants*, not passive recipients of information; i.e., they are workers in the learning process, and teachers facilitate their learning.
- The system provides enough time and opportunities for all students to master *challenging curriculum.*
- The system's responsibility is to help all students learn to use their minds well and to become *lifelong learners.*

## Defining the Vision

There are as many different visions and ways to develop a vision as there are education systems. Developing a vision does not mean starting from scratch, and it does not mean standing still. A vision-setting process can and should be designed to meet the needs of the community or organization it is designed to serve.

A vision should focus on desired outcomes. It also should be inspirational and compelling. A vision should make people think about how the world can be different if they are willing to change the way the education system operates. At its core, a vision is an expression of community values. It should reflect those values and beliefs that bind a community together and define its shared responsibility to students.

The process of setting a vision can originate from many places — the state education agency, a specially appointed task force, educators, coalitions or other interested parties. More critical than who originates or oversees the process is whom the process includes.

Establishing a vision begins as a conversation about the future among members of a community. In its simplest terms, a vision describes the ideal education system. *What does it look like? What does it sound like? What does it value? What kinds of learners does it produce? What can students in this system do? What knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes do they have? How does the system function to produce these kinds of learners? Who is involved and what are their roles?*

Conversations about such issues build ownership. Even if a vision is established initially at a more centralized level, such as the state, local groups should be encouraged to discuss, adopt and tailor the vision statement to make it their own.

Shared ownership is critical because, in the final analysis, the keepers of the vision are not the leaders who oversee the process of articulating a vision, but the people who are called upon to carry it out.

### WHY IS VISION SO IMPORTANT?

**A vision . . .**

- **. . . provides a common reference point** for participants with different perspectives in the reform effort, expressing common goals that supersede individual interests.
- **. . . can help raise public expectations** for both education system and student performance. Meaningful reform will not occur without significantly higher expectations.
- **. . . helps gain support for reform** by showing people how reform will look and how their roles in the education system and their relationships with students and one another will be different.
- **. . . builds persistence**. People committed to a common vision do not give up easily in the face of adversity.
- **. . . provides indicators** by which to measure progress.
- **. . . helps motivate**, inspire and call people to action.
- . . . is a tool that **allows a community to control its own destiny**. By articulating a positive image of the future, a vision enhances our ability to plan ahead and to stay on track in times of conflict, economic hardship and change.
- **. . . provides continuity** to bridge changes in leadership as policy makers or managers leave office.
- **. . . provides a professional focus** for teachers and administrators and the context for a conversation about the best ways to educate students.

## WHAT DOES A VISION LOOK LIKE?

An effective vision can take many forms. For example:

- **A description of what success looks like —**

  *A math or science classroom for the 21st century would include:*

  Hands-on, active learning

  Scientific and mathematical equipment and objects to manipulate

  Students working together on self-directed projects

  Stimulating books, magazines and videos

  More student dialogue, less teacher talk

  More questioning and discussing, less seeking of "right" answers

  Students making their own discoveries instead of memorizing answers

  Teachers not only lecturing, but also coaching, role playing, facilitating

  Students writing, reading and using their knowledge of math and science to further their understanding of history, art and literature.

- **A statement of shared principles —**

  *Re:Learning, a joint effort of the Coalition of Essential Schools, ECS and participating states, has set nine common principles to guide activities in schools. Those principles include:*

  Intellectual focus

  Simple goals

  Universal goals that apply to all students

  Personalization of teaching and learning

  Demonstration of mastery

  Operating metaphor of "student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach"

  Tone of trust, decency and unanxious expectation

  Faculty as generalists first and subject-area experts second

  Maximum of 80 students per teacher; budget not greater than 110% of traditional school

- **A list of persistent themes in current and planned reform initiatives —**

  *The nation's governors shaped these National Education Goals for the year 2000:*

  All children will start school ready to learn.

  The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.

  Students in grades 4, 8 and 12 will demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter, including English, math, science, history and geography; and every school will ensure students learn to use their minds well.

  U.S. students will be first in the world in science and math achievement.

  Every adult will be literate.

  Every school will be free of drugs and violence.

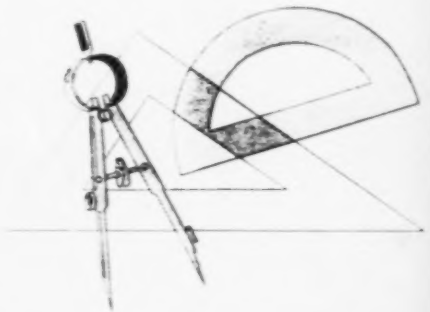
# STANDARDS

Standards translate a broad vision into statements of desired performance outcomes. These expected outcomes encourage all students to learn at higher levels and provide benchmarks by which to assess student performance and the effectiveness of reform efforts.

Standards cover broad ground. Standards can be set for:

- Students — what students should know and be able to do
- Schools — what type and quality of instruction schools should provide to students
- The education system as a whole — what policies create the environment that will lead to improved student learning

Standards can take several forms. They can delineate skills and knowledge students are expected to achieve in different subject areas, or they can outline the broader skills students should acquire across subject areas, such as thinking, communication and learning. Standards can focus exclusively on academic competencies or include skills related to civic life and work as well.





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## THE BENEFITS OF STANDARDS

Interest in standards has spurred a recent flurry of activity at the national, state and local levels. Gallup Poll surveys indicate that three-quarters of the American public favor standards for student performance. Diverse business, education and professional organizations have joined the call for an education system based on clear standards for students. Standards are being promoted as an essential component of changing education systems because they *provide the common base that makes reform meaningful.* They serve as the anchor to link changes in curriculum, teacher preparation, instructional methods and assessment. Reaching agreement on standards is a complex but necessary task.

Standards should be tied to assessments to ensure assessments provide the kinds of information schools, districts and states need. At present, student performance is generally judged by whether a student tests above or below average on a multiple-choice examination. Such tests allow teachers to monitor and follow progress of individual students and classes as a whole and provide information on how student performance in a district, state or the nation changes over time.

However, these tests provide limited information by which to determine, for example, why a student scored poorly in a particular area. And teachers often do not use test results to evaluate their own teaching. In addition, such tests are based on outdated assumptions of how people learn and do not show whether a student can actually demonstrate a skill.

In contrast, performance-based assessments, which require students to perform actual tasks in order to **demonstrate** what they know, enable schools to assess whether relatively good performance is world-class or merely adequate. High standards keyed to world-class performance levels are necessary to *protect the economic health and competitiveness of the nation.*

Standards also *reflect a common core of learning and contribute to a sense of community.* They *reinforce attention to equity* by reflecting high performance expectations for all students, including those who are presently underserved. High, uniform standards underscore the importance of effort and encourage an education system that promotes effort rather than innate ability.

In addition, standards *serve as a tool to judge how well education systems are performing.* They provide a guide by which to hold systems accountable for how well students

learn, rather than how much time they spend in class or how well a school or district complied with state regulations.

### Some Cautions

Although standards are a critical piece of any comprehensive reform strategy, they need to be designed and implemented with caution. Standards create a framework that helps a vision to succeed, but they also must:

- **Allow flexibility.** Standards should be broad enough to allow teachers flexibility in how they run their classroom and students flexibility in how they learn.
- **Be tailored to the local level.** Standards adopted at the state or national level should be considered and adopted locally, then personalized to reflect local reform efforts.
- **Encourage creativity.** Standards should help teachers define their curriculum, but should not be so restrictive as to stifle creative ideas and teaching methods.

Policy makers, educators and other persons working to set standards for their state or district need to address certain issues that can thwart any benefits standards provide. Concerns about standards tend to fall into several categories: Who sets the standards? By what process will standards be set? Toward what ends will the standards, once adopted, be applied?

Educators and policy makers need to consider how issues such as those listed below apply to their situation:

- How can we ensure that standards set at national or state levels do not drive a national or state curriculum and/or undermine local control? Standards should help set a broad framework for the education system — a framework that can be personalized in every district.
- How can we maintain diversity, vitality and community responsiveness if standards are set centrally? Standards should not, in effect, tell communities and people at the local level what to think and what to value.
- Will a single set of standards encompass the rich variety of geographic, racial, ethnic and cultural heritages reflected in our communities? Each district or

## WHAT FORMS CAN STANDARDS TAKE?

Standards can be structured in different ways to meet reform objectives of the state or district in which they are developed. The following examples illustrate different approaches to setting standards. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they reflect different perspectives.

***Maine's Common Core of Learning*** defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes that all Maine students should have when they graduate from high school. The core was drafted by a commission of 45 individuals from all walks of life. Commission members spent 16 months reading about issues in each content area; meeting with students, educators (including subject-area specialists), and scores of other citizens; and distilling letters and public comments from eight regional forums.

The commission found commonalities among the skills, knowledge and attitudes required in each subject area, "a dimension not seen when any one subject area was viewed in isolation." That finding led the commission to organize what students should know and be able to do into four categories that cut across subject areas — Communication, Personal and Global Stewardship, The Human Record, and Reasoning and Problem Solving.

In drafting the "core," the commission noted: "We all have an obligation to identify the roles we can play in transforming education from what it is to what it could be. The Commission on Maine's Common Core of Learning calls on students, educators, parents, citizens, government officials and all other Maine people to carry out the vision and potential embodied in this document."



***The National Commission on Education Standards and Testing*** (NCEST) was created in response to interest by the nation's governors, the Bush administration and Congress. It was charged with investigating the desirability and feasibility of national standards and testing in education. NCEST endorsed national standards that encompass five components:

- A brief, guiding statement describing the vision for education standards in each subject area
- Content standards that describe the knowledge, skills and other understandings that schools should teach
- Student performance standards that define various levels of competence in the skills and knowledge described in the content standards
- School standards that define criteria to enable parents, policy makers and the public to assess school performance in teaching students the skills and knowledge described in the content standards
- System performance standards that set criteria by which to assess the performance of school districts, states and the nation in educating all students to the high levels of performance described in the content standards



***The Council for Basic Education*** recently released a chart that seeks to organize the work and opinions of experts and policy makers on the question of standards. The chart is organized by subject matter and contains for each subject:

- A vision for the ends of K-12 education
- Expectations for student performance at grades 4, 8 and 12 that define benchmarks towards achieving that vision
- A cross-index of how subject areas are linked to highlight connections among disciplines



***The Project Zero Development Group***, an interdisciplinary research team at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, led by Howard Gardner, investigates fundamental processes of human learning, understanding and creativity in all disciplines. From research in the disciplines as well as with diverse groups of adults and children, the team defined seven intelligences that each person possesses: linquistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, inter- and intrapersonal. Believing that everyone could learn much more if he or she were encouraged to draw on all seven, the group has pioneered alternative forms of assessment and curriculum, produced educational materials for these purposes and used the materials to enhance teacher development.



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state needs to ensure that its cultural diversity is not lost.

- How can we ensure that standards-setting does not chill or derail educational reform efforts already under way? Rather than dictate precisely what every district must do, standards should guide community debate.
- How can we guarantee that the public has a voice in the standards-setting process and that the process is not dominated by "experts"? Parents, citizens and taxpayers need to be part of the process for reform to succeed.
- How can we supply local communities and citizens with the information and tools they need to review their education system critically, make standards their own and aspire to continually higher levels of performance?
- How can we make sure that new, higher standards match changes in the ways schools and districts operate? If they do not, standards can broaden the gulf between the educational "haves "and the "have-nots."
- Finally, how can we ensure that standards translate into equity and excellence for **all** students and do not lead to tracking or ability grouping for some? True reform dictates that we raise expectations for every student and use standards as a benchmark by which to encourage equity and excellence for all.

**"We want our students to . . . acquire the fundamental and specific aspects of each subject area and be able to integrate this knowledge to see the world as a multi-faceted whole."**

Commission on Maine's Common Core of Learning

Such concerns about standards can often be dealt with on a local level. Depending upon the degree of latitude given by the state, schools and districts may want to adopt state standards as is, study the standards and how they relate to what they are doing locally, and/or make the standards fit their own circumstances. Equity concerns can be addressed if standards are accompanied by reforms that ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve the standards. Regardless, persons involved in education reform need to recognize that standards are not a solution in themselves; only when coupled with significant, systemic reform will they lead to improved education.

## A Process for Establishing Standards

Each state or district considering standards will need to define an adoption process appropriate to its reform efforts and circumstances. There is no single right way to proceed, and no one has the luxury of beginning with a blank slate.

Considerations in developing a process include:

- The process can be overseen by a bipartisan legislative task force, the state education agency, a specially appointed commission or any number of other local or state groups or committees.
- The process should involve education "consumers": parents, students, representatives of higher education, business and society. Standards will generate higher expectations only if there is widespread support for them.
- To be most effective, the process should be broad-based, interactive and iterative. They should build in a mechanism for receiving input from both the public and education professionals at the state, district and school levels.
- The process of adopting standards should be preceded by adoption of a vision. The vision establishes priorities and serves as a tool by which to resolve differences as standards are developed.
- Because educational excellence is a moving target, the standards-setting process needs to be dynamic and self-renewing.
- Most critically, the process should ensure that standards themselves are visionary and reflect high expectations for students, schools and education systems as a whole. Experience shows that the reach seldom exceeds the aim: if standards are keyed to minimum competencies, that quickly will become the level at which the education system performs.

## Conclusion

A vision is an absolute precondition to creating an education system that will effectively educate students for the 21st century. The adoption of performance standards that reflect that vision can create powerful momentum for reform. Both are critical pieces of the reform puzzle, but they are only pieces. Their purpose and contribution is to define the destination of education restructuring efforts. They must be joined with policies and strategies that provide all schools and communities with the necessary tools to ensure that all students have a fair opportunity to reach this destination.

*The* Restructuring the Education System *series is part of the ECS Systems Change initiative. ECS wishes to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the UNUM Life Insurance Company for their support of these publications.*

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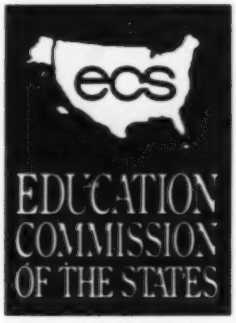


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*Building Private Sector and Community Support* — Defines the role of public/private coalitions needed to lead the call for a new education system (SI-92-2) $4

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**Maine Governor John R. McKernan Jr., 1991-92 ECS chairman, is a leading advocate for education reform in Maine and New England. As Maine's first Republican governor in two decades, his tenure has been marked by new initiatives designed to expand opportunities for non-college-bound youth, increase accountability and strengthen curriculum. His leadership won recognition for Maine in 1989 as National Alliance of Business "State of the Year" for human resource initiatives.**

**A Bangor native who graduated from Dartmouth College and the University of Maine School of Law, McKernan also chairs the National Governors' Association Committee on Human Resources and the Jobs for America's Graduates program. Previously, he served two terms as Maine's representative in the U.S. Congress, where he served on the House Education and Labor Committee.**





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